

Two and the same



By Tim Dean
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Have you heard the story of George Washington's Axe? It persists to this day, on display in the home of a proud couple living in rural Virginia. It's the authentic axe, though it shines like new. That's because they've taken exceptional care of it. They've replaced the head twice and the handle three times.

A similar fate befell the great ship of minotaur-slayer and Athenian hero Theseus. The ship was carefully preserved by the Athenians, for centuries. As the old planks of the ship decayed with age, they were replaced with fresh wood. Some said there were now miraculously two ships of Theseus, even though the hero only ever knew of one: the vessel that carried him home from Crete. That ship came to be known as the Original.

But, replacing a few parts of an object clearly does not extinguish its identity. There has been a single ship, occupying one location over time, admired by the proud citizens of Athens even as its individual planks were replaced. That ship came to be called the Replacement, and many saw it and the Original were one and the same.

Then there's the rumor that some enterprising Athenian shipwrights kept the old planks from the Original and used them to construct a new ship following the Original's design. This ship came to be known as the Reassembly, and many saw that it and the Original were one and the same.

There's also tale of no less than three and a half George Washington axes: Replacement One; Replacement Two; Reassembly; and a strange hybrid of Replacement Three's handle and some other axe head that no-one talks about in polite company. The question is: which is more the myth? George Washington's axe? Theseus' ship? Or our concept of identity?

